

From the Asheville Citizen-Times:

WNC crafts grace White House

By John Boyle

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Mitchell County has hit the big time.

A marketing idea that began on a lark in this county of 16,000 people has landed local handmade Christmas ornaments in the White House.

A lot of them.

First Lady Laura Bush ordered 250 ornaments produced by mountain artisans through the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree program. Two White House Christmas trees are garnished with 135 hand-blown red glass balls and 115 "Carolina snowflakes."

The program obviously impressed the first lady, who referred to it as "a very wonderful American story" during her kickoff Thursday of White House holiday parties and receptions. Bush said the ornaments reflect the determination of a community to rebuild an economy hit hard by the loss of manufacturing jobs.

"They all worked together to figure out a new industry for themselves," Bush said.

Shirley Hise, executive director of the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce, and Patti Jensen, the project coordinator, met with Bush on Thursday afternoon in the White House.

Mitchell: Exposure fills residents with glee

"It was absolutely fabulous," Hise said. "She was just delightful, and what impressed me was she seemed to know and understand the project."

Jensen described it as "an out-of-body experience."

"It's kind of like your wedding day – you know you're in the middle of something really big, something that's impacting your life, but it's almost like you're not there," Jensen said with a laugh.

One tree is just outside the Oval Office, and the other is in the East Wing reception area.

Asheville glass artist Virgil Jones produced the 135 red glass balls, while renowned basket artist Billie Ruth Sudduth and four workers made 115 of the snowflakes, which are made from red, green and walnut reeds.

"There's just an air of excitement around here," said Sudduth, who lives in Mitchell County. "It's hard to describe – people are grinning from ear to ear because little Mitchell County is getting national exposure for this."

The comprehensive marketing and tourism plan plays off the 1988 Gloria Houston children's book, "The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree," which has sold more than a million copies worldwide. Hosting a Christmas parade in 2003, Houston jokingly suggested to officials that they use her book to market Mitchell as the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree.

That's exactly what they did.

"These are miracle women – they create miracles," said Houston, who lives in Candler. "I've worked on a lot of projects in my life, but I've never seen any two women work this hard."

Hise, Jensen and other workers got the campaign going and then last year opened a Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store in downtown Spruce Pine, featuring products ranging from plates to lanterns that are either in the book or inspired by it. The idea was to boost the economy in the mountains, particularly in Mitchell, which has lost more than 2,000 manufacturing jobs since 1998.

"We've doubled the number of product makers since last year – we now have 31, and we had 15 last year," Hise said. "We probably have 15 or 20 new products, and we have added a catalog."

Besides boosting the economy and tourism, the program also partially funds a scholarship fund in Mitchell.

U.S. Rep. Patrick McHenry, who represents Mitchell County, had the initial meeting with Bush to present the program and products. He says the program is "the very definition of using creativity to overcome adversity."

So, what's next for Hise and Jensen? Hise said her dream was to have the products placed in the White House. For Jensen, the absolute dream is having them featured in Macy's department store windows.

"I guess I'll have to call Macy's now," Jensen said, laughing.

Gannett News Service staff writer Ellyn Ferguson contributed to this report.

